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December 2006

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## VOLUME 19 NUMBER 10 DECEMBER 2006

### IN THE FLESH

At this time of year we celebrate that the "Word was made flesh" in Jesus Christ. What does it mean to be made flesh? What does it mean to be human, both for Jesus and for us?

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VOICES

## In the Flesh

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

In this issue, we reflect on what it means that Jesus was made flesh, human like us, to be with us. By his incarnation, Jesus shows us that our physical being matters to God. Our bodies, hallowed by the incarnation, are members of Christ's body through the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist. God does not disdain the physical world. *Matter matters.*

Being made flesh also means being vulnerable to sin and suffering and death. The Bible study looks at suffering caused by sin—our own, the sin of others, and the sin of the wider community. It is not easy to face, the pain and sorrow that we unloose in the world. Our only hope is in the amazing grace of God, the gift of God-with-us in Jesus Christ.

At this time in the church year we are especially reminded of that gift. In "The Coming of Christ," Julie Aageson tells us, "More than anything else, Christmas is the revelation of God's overwhelming and extravagant love. The generosity of God in Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the fulfillment of our deepest hopes."

The music we hear in this season expresses our longing and hope. A young writer Emily Williams tells how, even in her college-age rejection of faith, she was moved by Handel's *Messiah*: "Each year when I went home for Christmas and, following our tradition, sang the 'Hallelujah' chorus in the living room with family and friends, I sang my heart out. . . . At least for those few minutes each winter—I believed it with my whole being."

On the fourth Sunday in Advent we hear the words of Mary's song, the Magnificat. Jesus was born of a woman—a woman of flesh and blood just as we are—who welcomed God's amazing (and terrifying) gift with humility and rejoicing. Pastor Anne Andert's reflection "Blessed in Believing" challenges us: "God continues to come to each of us. We, too, are called to be Christ-bearers in a world that is filled with suffering."

As we are to be Christ-bearers in the world, we are called to care for those whose lives are full of struggle and suffering—the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the refugee, and the persecuted. In "Jesus Was a Refugee," Cassandra Champion tells of several refugees who are being helped by the work of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. She reminds us that Jesus was born in a stable because there was no room, as his parents were far from home.

In "Jesus with Us," Kathryn Simons of the ELCA World Hunger Appeal writes, "On that first Christmas, Jesus Emmanuel, was found among the poor and lowly. Today, Jesus is with the 800 million people who suffer from chronic hunger and poverty. Jesus is with the 5 million children under five who will die this year of hunger-related causes."

As Jesus stands with those who suffer, let us do likewise. For practical ways to help, see "All We Want for Christmas Are Good Gifts" by Sue Edison-Swift. We can make a difference. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. Write to her at [lwt@elca.org](mailto:lwt@elca.org).





GIVE US THIS DAY

## Becoming One With

by Marj Leegard

### Why a manger for a bed?

Why a quiet little town? Why shepherds?

If God wanted to become one with us, there could have been other ways to do it. God could have announced the *great presence* with 400,000 white horses pulling 100,000 gold chariots. What a sight that would have been! God could have done that.

But, announcing presence is not the same as *becoming one with*. It would have been difficult for the fishermen and tax collectors to understand those horses and chariots and God's presence as being one with them.

The Triune God was one with us in birth. Mary delivered Jesus into the world. The manger, the straw, and the animals all made that birth understandable to us. Oh yes, had we been the inn-keeper things would have been different. But we weren't, and would we really have been so different? We know there are homeless people, even on Christmas, and still we say, "No room!"

The manger bed is the place. God wanted us to know about the love poured out from heaven and so the star shone over the place.

But only one star? God could have lit the heavens with such light and such a crash that "big bang" would hardly be an adequate description. But if the heavens shook with pulsating lights and reverberating thunder, what of the people? Would they be frightened? Chasing after their terrified animals running panic-stricken across the fields? They would have no time for awe.

In the temple, the ancient prophecies and promises could not be read by the glaring light.

No. One silent star was the right way. One star for God's people to follow.

And who should hear the angels' glad tidings? The kings? The temple officials? The Romans? The mayor of Bethlehem?

Mary knew, but she was sleeping as human mothers do after seeing that their newborn child is clean and warm and comfortable. The shepherds slept beside their flickering fires in a sleep that was only a little shut-eye. The sheep had to be watched over in the night. And so the shepherds slept the light sleep of caregivers in all times, ever alert for the sound that is different. And the message came to them. The song was clear, out on that hillside away from all distractions of lights and noise.

The shepherds were free to send some to follow the star and some to stay and tend the flocks, confident that the news would come back to them.

Far away in the east, three travelers were making ready for a journey. They chose gifts to carry along, samples of their wealth. Gold. Fragrant potions. Healing balms.

Kings and shepherds. Townspeople and taxpayers. The story came into their lives and it lives on yet today.

Unto us a child is born. A Savior who is Christ the Lord. 🌸

**Marj Leegard** and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.





## CALENDAR NOTES

# December

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley  
from sources including Evangelical  
Lutheran Worship, Sundays and  
Seasons, and Lutheran Book  
of Worship, published by  
Augsburg Fortress, Publishers  
([www.augsburgfortress.org](http://www.augsburgfortress.org))

## This month, the church

begins not only a new season, Advent, but a new liturgical year. This year C of the three-year lectionary cycle opens the Gospel of Luke for us.

From the Middle Ages to the middle of the 20th century, Christians heard only two short readings from Scripture at church each Sunday, and they were the same each year. The three-reading, three-year lectionary that we and many other Christians now use had its beginnings in the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The Council wrote, “The riches of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word.” The three-year lectionary was first published for Roman Catholic use in 1969. Other Christians quickly saw the benefits of the three-year plan and developed adaptations that reflected their own traditions. Some observers say that the three-year lectionary was the most significant ecumenical achievement of the 20th century. See *A Three-Year Banquet: The Lectionary for the Assembly* by Gail Ramshaw (Augsburg Fortress, 2004) for more.

### 3 First Sunday of Advent

In Advent, we look forward to the coming of the promised Messiah both in Bethlehem and at the end of time. We always hear prophecies of the Second Coming in the texts appointed for the first Sunday of the season. Jeremiah tells us in today’s first reading (3:14–16), “The days are surely coming,” says the LORD, “when I will fulfill the promise I

made.” In today’s Gospel (Luke 21:25–36), Jesus reminds us that the Day of the Lord is about redemption, not destruction.

Christians began observing Advent as early as the fourth century, as a season of preparation for baptism at Epiphany. The end-time theme emerged by about the 12th century. Advent’s mood is watchful expectation and solemnly joyful hope preparing the way of the Lord.

Light one candle on your Advent wreath today.

### 6 Nicholas, bishop of Myra

Legends surround this fourth-century bishop. One story tells of his secretly giving bags of gold to the three daughters of a poor father who was going to sell them into prostitution because he couldn’t provide for them. Like Nicholas, the Women of the ELCA work to end commercial sexual exploitation; our resource *A Day Full of Light* is available for download from [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org).

### 7 Ambrose, bishop of Milan

Ambrose is considered the founder of metrical hymnody—rhymed verses set to music—and was the first Western bishop to encourage congregational singing. (We have a lot to thank Ambrose for.) His congregation sang so beautifully that an army of Goths refused to disturb them!

### 10 Second Sunday of Advent

Another prophet speaks (Malachi 3:1–4), “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me,” says the Lord, and in the Gospel, Luke tells us who



his messenger is: John the Baptist (1:1-6). What does John say about how we can prepare the way of the Lord? Read Luke 3:10-15.

### 23 Lucy, martyr

In the fourth century, this young Sicilian Christian was martyred. On the old Julian calendar, her feast day fell on the shortest day of the year. Since Lucy's name, Lucia, means "light," popular customs arose in places where the winter nights are particularly long and dark. In Norway and Sweden, a daughter of the household, wearing a crown of candles, brings saffron rolls to the family early on Lucia's day.

### 24 Third Sunday of Advent

Now Advent's mood shifts from preparation for Christ's coming at the end of time to preparation for Christ's birth in Bethlehem as one of us, like us in all but sin. Christians have long sung the ancient Octiphons in this last part of Advent; the beloved hymn "O come, O come, Emmanuel" is a translation.

### 25 Katharine von Bora Luther, renewer of the church

This capable woman not only kept the busy Luther household running (up to 40 guests at once!), she took an active part in Martin's theological discussions, ran a brewery, took care of the crops, and tended the animals. Dr. Stefan Rhein, director

of the Lutherhalle Museum, said, "Katharine von Bora was Luther's companion and equal partner; she was the picture of a self-assured, self-confident, liberated woman at the side of her husband. And yet, this most important woman of the Reformation . . . is relatively unknown; for she lived in the shadow of her powerful husband."

### 24 Fourth Sunday of Advent

It's still Advent until tonight! The Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent (Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]) gives us the inspired words of two inspiring mothers. Read Mary's triumphant song and consider how her prophetic words were reflected in the ministry of her Son. (See "Blessed in Believing," page 8, for more.)

Light all four candles on your Advent wreath today.

### 24 Nativity of our Lord: Christmas Eve

Between the Fourth Sunday of Advent service this morning and the Christmas Eve service tonight, the congregation hurries to replace Advent's blue with Christmas white and prepares to greet the many visitors who always come on Christmas Eve. Welcome them warmly, as Mary and Joseph welcomed the shepherds (see tonight's Gospel, Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]).

### 25 Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day

Since at least the sixth century

there have been three Christmas services: midnight, dawn, and day. The Gospels appointed for today are Luke 2:[1-7] 8-20 (substantially the same beloved story as at the midnight service) and John 1:1-14. Very different ways to tell the story! The incarnation of our Lord has so much meaning for all creation that the story can't be told just one way.

### 26 Stephen, deacon and martyr

This first Christian martyr's story is told in Acts 6 and 7.

### 27 John, apostle and evangelist

Scholars estimate that John's Gospel was written in about the year 90, in Ephesus.

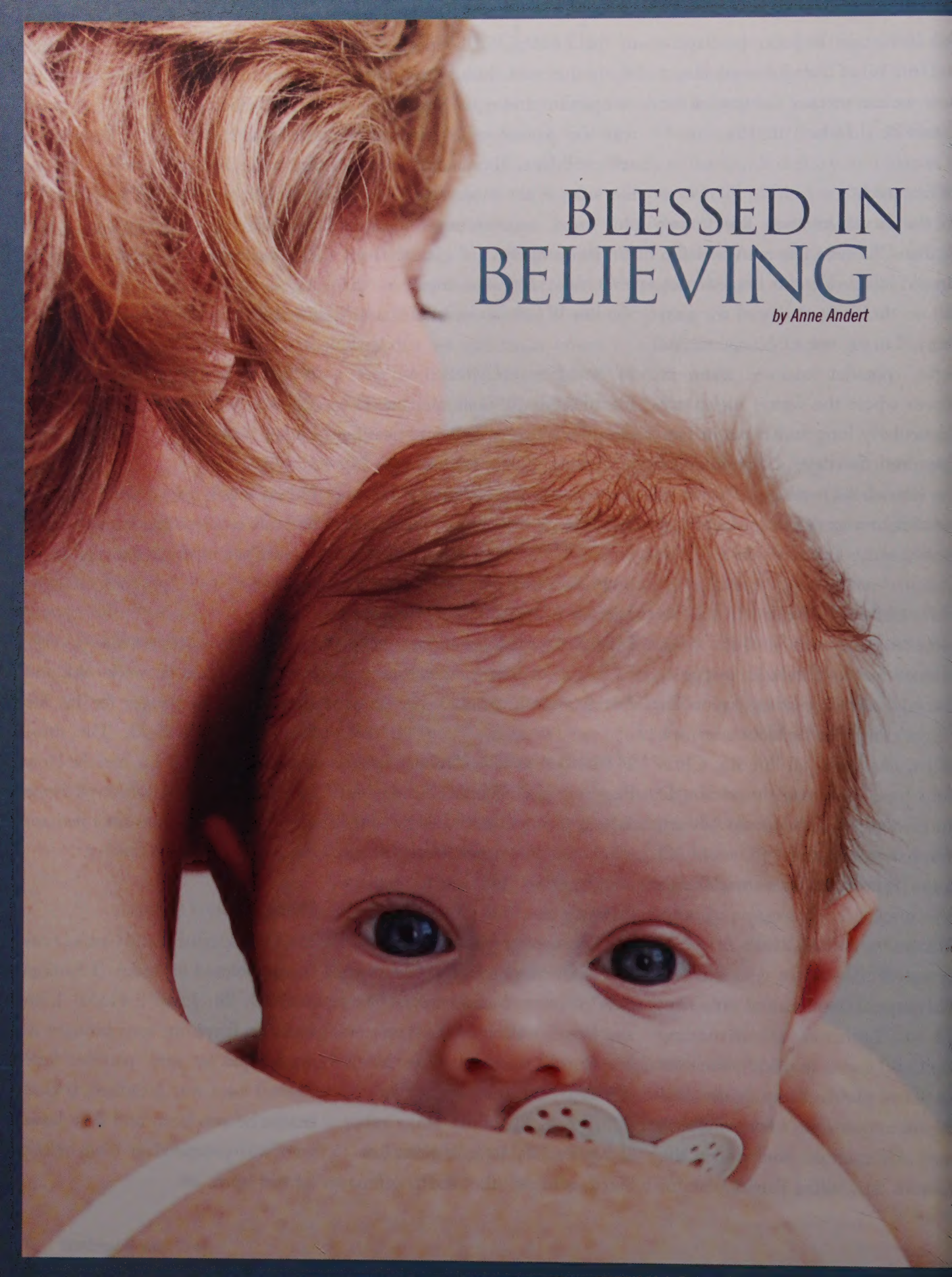
### 28 The Holy Innocents, martyrs

Jesus isn't even a week old and already he's in danger for his life. See Matthew 2:13-23. The three feasts of Stephen, John, and the Holy Innocents have been observed immediately after Christmas since perhaps the end of the fourth century.

### 31 First Sunday of Christmas

The Old Testament and Gospel readings appointed for today (1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52) both focus on first-born sons brought to the temple by their parents: little Samuel who was promised *to* God before he was born and little Jesus who was promised *by* God before he was born. 🌿





# BLESSED IN BELIEVING

*by Anne Andert*



# WASN'T EXPECTING TO HEAR ABOUT BABIES.

was at a meeting where a local foundation announced that they had received a very large grant to support worthy causes in my area.

The woman sitting next to me in the back row was holding her baby. The president of the foundation stood at the podium and looked over the heads of the distinguished guests to that little one nestling comfortably in her mother's arms.

She drew everyone's attention to that infant at the back of the room and said with conviction, "If you're ever making really important decisions, hold a baby in your arms while you are considering the options. You'll make the right decision every time."

## CALLED TO HOPE

Babies and children call us to hope in the future. Ask anyone who is grieving the death of a spouse. Is there a sweeter comfort than holding a little grandchild when your heart is sore with grief? When our hearts are brimming with what's lost, babies remind us of what's left and pull us into what's possible.

In the congregation I serve is a set of adorable twin girls. They were born on September 11, 2001, the day most of us sat glued in horror to the news reports as the World Trade Center towers crumbled into

dust. But the birth of these two children, full of grace and light, seems to me to be an emphatic "Yes!" to life and joy in defiance of the darkness of that day.

One Sunday after worship, one of these two joyful little girls tugged on my hand and guided me to our chapel. She and her sister wanted to play "church," and they would be the pastors. They directed my husband, who is co-pastor of the church, their mother, and me to kneel at the altar railing and fold our hands. The girls then came by and pressed their small hands over ours saying, "Blessing, blessing, blessing! Jesus loves you. Amen."

## NEW WORLD ORDER

This month, we celebrate the birth of our Savior who first came to us as a baby and continues to come to us through the gifts of grace. If we are wise we will stop long enough to receive once again the blessing of Jesus and his love for us.

In Luke 1:39-56, we read of Mary's journey to see her relative Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit as the pregnant Mary greets her. Elizabeth exclaims, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Then from Mary's mouth come the prophetic words of the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Mary's words prophesy the new world order that would come in God's good time, when Jesus would exalt the poor and humble over those who now hold earthly power. These are words that comfort the poor and terrify the rich. Mary speaks of a social order that does not make sense in the society she lived in. God will have regard for the poor. God will exalt the poor, feed them, help them, and remember them. Revolutionary thoughts and words!

Until Mary gives voice to her Magnificat, the order of society and the world is understood—the rich and powerful are first; the poor and suffering are last. Mary's words call for a whole new understanding. It doesn't make sense to the people, even to Jesus' disciples. The kingdom of God has a different set of rules than our world.

I imagine the young Mary nursing the baby Jesus and rocking him gently after his meal, all the while speaking softly with her face close to his. How did she encourage his life of prayer and his love of the poor and the sick? What words did Mary whisper in Jesus' little ear as she laid



him down to nap? Perhaps she spoke to him of how God had reached out to her, a young, poor woman (thus triply barred from earthly power), and blessed her with Jesus. Little did she know what shape her words would take in Jesus' life.

## TRUSTING AND BELIEVING

The foundation president, in pointing out the infant at the back of the room, took our attention away from all that money to the importance of a baby in her mother's arms. Likewise, Jesus took the focus away from the rich and powerful and lifted up the poor and powerless, just as his mother had prophesied. The priorities in God's world stand in stark contrast to the way our world operates. God's ways are clearly not our ways.

Mary could have chosen not to let God work through her. But she trusted that God had a plan and she was to be part of it. She did not

know the details, but she obeyed in trust and hope. She believed that the Lord would do as he said, and in that believing she was blessed.

Mary did not answer the angel begrudgingly or with gritted teeth. She welcomed the Lord's coming into her life with humble joy. She offered praise. The 11th-century German theologian Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is *thank you*, it will be enough."

Mary trusted and believed and so was blessed. She bore Jesus in her body and birthed him into the world. Jesus grew up to speak words of hope to the hopeless and to be a light in the darkness that can never be extinguished.

## CHRIST-BEARERS

God continues to come to each of us. We are called to be Christ-bearers in a world that is filled with suffering. Do we respond with gritted teeth

or with joy? Do we welcome God's interference with our little plans? Can we open our hearts to hear what God is calling us to do?

Blessing always comes from trusting that God's word will be fulfilled. Mary was blessed. Elizabeth was blessed. Jesus was blessed. God is waiting and wanting to bless us, too.

How will we respond when God breaks into our lives, into our congregations, into our world with a mission for us to fulfill?

May we trust that God will keep God's promises to us, may we be courageous in doing God's will, and may we be blessed in the believing as were Elizabeth, Mary, and Jesus. Surely God is with us—Emmanuel! The light will continue to shine in the darkness. 🌸

**Anne Andert** and her husband, David Andert, are pastors of Our Redeemer's Lutheran Church in Benson, Minn.

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ET US PRAY

## Walking with God

y Debra K. Farrington

Contemplative walking has never been my best skill. I've always walked quickly. I forget about enjoying the walk and focus instead on getting from here to there. But on the way to a recent conference, I dropped a suitcase on my toe. I spent the entire conference—and the next couple of weeks—practicing contemplative walking, not by choice, but by necessity. And it was good. There's more room for conversation with God when I'm not speeding from here to there.

Christians have a long history of contemplative walking, mostly in the form of pilgrimage. Before there were cars and planes, people walked on pilgrimage routes, usually in the company of others. They walked to various holy places in search of a deeper experience of God.

Jesus, too, spent a lot of time walking with his disciples, going from place to place, stopping along the way to chat with the people he met. There's never any sense in the Gospel stories that Jesus was in a hurry to get to the next town. This kind of slow walking—strolling—helps us to be present in the moment, as Jesus was, rather than focusing only on what's ahead. Contemplative walking—whether in city streets, a labyrinth, or the woods—can help us slow down and let God speak to us in the people and landscapes that we meet.

If walking contemplatively is difficult for you, as it was for me, try walking in time with your breathing, if your health

allows. Breathe in deeply and take four steps as you breathe in. Now breathe out slowly as you take four more steps. Keep repeating this as you walk along. It might feel awkward at first, but within a few minutes it'll seem perfectly natural. As you continue, your breathing will get fuller and your walking slower, giving you time to pay attention to and enjoy whatever's around you.

Pay attention, too, to your body's experience of this walk. Is your body relaxing? Does your back feel better? As you breathe, do you feel a bit more alive? As you slow down and forget about the day's stresses, is there more room for God and God's world in your heart and mind? That's the goal of this slow walking, this little mini-pilgrimage: to make time and space for conversation with God. When that happens your walk has become more than a walk; it has become a prayer. Blessings on your walk!

### Resources

Joyce Rupp is a beloved spiritual writer. Check out her book, *Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino* (Orbis, 2005), for a look at pilgrimage and the lessons to be learned along the way. For a good book on embodied prayer, you might pick up Jane Vennard's *Praying with Body and Soul: A Way to Intimacy with God* (Augsburg, 1998). 🌿

**Debra K. Farrington** is the author of eight books of Christian spirituality and an experienced retreat leader and speaker. Her Web site is [www.debrafarrington.com](http://www.debrafarrington.com).





## GOD MEETS US

*by Emily Williams*

I am not a fan of winter. I think that it should not exist at all. I admit, snow is pretty—to look at. It's thrilling to ski down big hills—on vacation. Ice skating, making snow angels, and tapping maple trees for syrup are nice, too. But I could do without the cold, the bitter winds, and the long hours of darkness, all of which lead me to echo the psalmist: “Will the LORD spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever?” (Psalm 77:7–8)





Perhaps I should just move to a warm, sunny place far south of Chicago. But for now, I'm here, and—like all hardy Midwesterners—getting re-acquainted (begrudgingly) with cold toes, icy sidewalks, and the sun's apparent 4:00 p.m. curfew.

Just as it starts to get really cold and depressing outside, Advent begins. In Advent, we enter into

a four-week season of the church year that does not dispel, but rather, embraces the unpleasantness of my least favorite season. It is as if the church in Advent already knows that our souls feel dark. We are shown that it is all right for our hearts to shiver, wounded and waiting. It is all right because God is with us—in our depression and in

our sorrow. Our God is with us whether our eyes are blurred by grief or by the very long nights of winter. In our bankruptcy, whether moved by the readings and prayers of Advent or by the conditions of our own lives, we might again join the psalmist, who cries out to God, "When will you comfort me?" (Psalm 119:82).



## GOD INSPIRED

It is now that God inspires musicians to tell us a story, one that we gather to hear year after year, in churches and concert halls. Many of us hear at least the first part of this story during Advent, although we may also experience it at Easter (when it was originally intended to be performed). It hardly demands further introduction: It is Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*, with a libretto by Charles Jennens, based on texts from both the Old and New Testaments.

*Messiah* was first performed April 13, 1742, for a hospital benefit concert in Dublin, Ireland. Ordinarily, a new oratorio by Handel would have made its premiere at a concert hall in London, but the London public was vehemently against the idea of sacred music being performed outside of a church: "How will this appear to After-Ages . . . that the most sacred Things were suffer'd to be us'd as public Diversions?" (*The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel* by Andrew Wilson-Dickson, Lion Publishing, 1992).

Over the next several years, church and community choirs began to perform *Messiah* on their own—paving the way for the situation we now enjoy, when, during the first few weeks of December, we might hear *Messiah* (or portions of it) presented by small congregations, community

organizations, or famous musicians at great concert halls—sometimes, all in the same weekend.

## THE ORATORIO

The oratorio is titled *Messiah*, not *The Messiah*, on purpose: The one-word title suggests a universal story of what a messiah is or might be, and does not link it to a specific figure. As strategic as this might have been in 18th-century London, and even though in the libretto the Messiah's name is nowhere to be found, it is plain to see that Jesus is that Messiah. Although Charles Jennens' libretto is very clearly a "believer's meditation on the supreme goodness of God in offering to the world his only Son" (*Handel's Messiah: A Celebration* by Richard Lockett, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1992), its intentional omissions allow us the freedom to decide for ourselves if Jesus and the Messiah are one and the same.

That is, perhaps, why *Messiah* is so incredibly popular: It resonates with us no matter where we are spiritually. A very wise conductor, Axel Theimer, once told me that we all—experts and novices alike—are merely in various stages of ignorance, and that we are to accept who and where we are, because we can be no one else but ourselves and nowhere else except in that moment. In *Messiah*, God meets us

where we are and welcomes us in.

If we are already blessed to know Jesus as our Savior, we pray through each aria and chorus of the oratorio, much as we would page through a precious photo album—grateful, joyful, and drawing yet deeper meaning through experiencing them again. Or perhaps we're at another place: drawn to the idea that Jesus is the Christ, but not quite able to get our minds around it or filled with doubt (it's too fantastic, too illogical, and regardless, it happened way too long ago). Handel composed this work for you, too.

## BELIEVER AGAIN

My college years were marked by an unstoppable desire to disprove the prime value my family had taught me: that Jesus is the living Lord, the Messiah sent to save us. I continued to come up with reason after reason why he could not be: The crucifixion was a hoax; he didn't actually die, but just passed out for a while, and so was never resurrected; he was a good teacher but his stories didn't make sense, so he couldn't be believed; he must have been crazy because no one in his right mind would say he was God. And so, to me, he wasn't.

And yet, each year when I went home for Christmas and, following our tradition, sang the "Hallelujah" chorus in the living room with family and friends, I sang my heart out



The music connected me to what my dim, stubborn mind rejected: that the Lord God is omnipotent and that Christ shall reign forever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah! And—at least for those few minutes each winter—I believed it with my whole being.

Two years ago, while singing the “Hallelujah” chorus with my church choir in a performance of the complete oratorio, tears tumbling down my face. In that moment, God not only met me there, but also shook and embraced me more deeply than I’d ever imagined—as only God can.

Last year, I sang *Messiah* with the choir again. The next morning, I woke up with a phrase from the chorus “Lift up your heads, O ye gates” stuck in my head, repeating relentlessly (and yes, annoyingly): “Who is this king of glory? Who is this king of glory?” I didn’t have a good answer, but I wanted to know so badly, I couldn’t stand it any longer. Later that same day, I applied to seminary.

Oh, God works in strange, strange ways.

## GOD IS WITH US

Many of us are, or have been, in such pain that we don’t know what to think about God. If God is supposed to be good but God doesn’t stop the pain, does that mean God doesn’t even exist? What kind of

God allows suffering—so much of it, and so many different kinds? Where is God in our loss, illness, sorrow, broken relationships, turmoil, failure, violence, disappointment, imbalance, loneliness, and grief? Where is God in my sin, weakness, and utter need?

Our gracious God is with us every moment, whether we realize it or not, including here at the beginning of *Messiah*, as the tenor sings: “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people,” saith your God” (Isaiah 40:1).

Comfort. Is God here in my soul, which grieves over my distance from God? Yet, even though my sin—and all of my sins—keep me from God, God miraculously does not stay away from me. I am certainly not like God. If I were God, I wouldn’t bother with me: Why pay any more attention to this little human who repeatedly fails to recognize overtures to love her? And then I rejoice that I’m not God—God is! Is God here in my heart—even when it’s shattered, bruised, or weak? Might God be here even in this Chicago winter? (Perhaps in the hearts of the friends who offer me hot chocolate and homemade cookies?)

In the rest of the opening aria from Isaiah 40, the voice of God not only offers us comfort, but also encourages us (“speaks comfortably”) and tells us that our estrangement from God has ended and

that our sins have been forgiven. What good, glorious, and completely undeserved news! The Messiah—Emmanuel, “God with us”—is here. Hallelujah!

We must remember, however, that *Messiah* is not just an Advent thing, or a Christmas thing, or even an Easter thing—if we’re fortunate enough to hear it then, too. Sometime, say, in the summer (how fun it is to think about summer!), you might happen to read 1 Corinthians 15, and notice that it sounds quite familiar, if for no other reason than that seven pieces from *Messiah* come from that chapter. (Can you name them?)

Some days, things just might not be going well, and you’ll remember the sound of the soprano, assuring you that Christ will “speak peace” and “give you rest.”

Our dear psalmist, when too troubled even to speak, “thought about the former days, the years of long ago” and “remembered songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired” (Psalm 77:5–6, NIV). The music of Handel’s *Messiah* opens our hearts to God in ways that the words of Scripture alone might not. May the music settle deep within you and become a gracious reminder, time and again, that God is here, and always will be. 🌿

**Emily Williams** lives near Chicago and is a first-year student in Garrett-Evangelical Seminary’s music ministry program.



# JESUS WAS A REFUGEE

by Cassandra A. Champion



During the Christmas season, we remember the story of Jesus' birth and recount the long journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. At the end of their trek across the desert and through the rocky hills, the time came for Mary to give birth. But the holy family found no room at the inn and had to take shelter in a stable. They wrapped Jesus in swaddling clothes and made a cattle trough, or manger, his first bed.

While Jesus was still very small, Joseph learned that Herod sought to destroy the Messiah. To protect Jesus, the holy family fled to Egypt, a land of refuge, where they remained until it was safe to return home.

Here at the beginning of Jesus' life on earth he was an alien, a stranger, a refugee. We are reminded:

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2).*



## ALWAYS WITH HOPE

Immigrants around the world are forced to make the hard decision to leave their homelands. They leave behind their families, cultures, communities, their houses of worship, and their homes—everything they know—in search of better lives. They endure great hardships yet hold onto hope, knowing that God's purpose for them is greater than that which they leave behind.

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope* (Jeremiah 29:11).

Today, there are more than 12 million refugees in the world fleeing from persecution, seeking safe homes. A refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of origin because of past persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution, based on the person's race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion.

Many refugees flee with no more than the clothes on their backs. They escape from war, tyranny, oppression. They leave because of fear or famine, but always with hope.

### SOMALI BANTU REFUGEES

The civil war in Somalia, which began in the early 1990s, led to the collapse of not only the government, but also society as a whole in this coastal nation in East Africa. Millions of displaced Somalis sought asylum in neighboring countries. Most crossed the border to Kenya, where the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees established refugee camps. Among the most affected by the civil war were the Somali Bantu, a marginalized minority group that had long been afforded very few educational or economic opportunities.

In the late 1990s, the United States government offered resettlement to more than 14,000 Somali Bantu refugees then living at the

Kakuma Camp in Kenya. The first group of Somali Bantu arrived in 2003 and they continue to resettle in America today.

### MESKHETIAN TURKISH REFUGEES FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

Originally from an agricultural region of Georgia along the border of Turkey, the Meskhetian Turks were deported primarily to Uzbekistan by Stalin during the 1950s. As the Soviet Union began to fall apart in the late 1980s, ethnic tension in Uzbekistan forced the Meskhetian Turks to disperse throughout Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia. The Meskhetian Turks, most of whom are Muslim, were not allowed to become citizens, own land, or have full access to education.

### KAREN CHRISTIAN REFUGEES IN THAILAND

There are more than 100,000 refugees from Myanmar (formerly Burma) now living in Thailand.



# KHADIJAH



COUNTRY OF ORIGIN  
**SOMALIA**

CURRENT HOME  
**UNITED STATES**

Early one morning while Khadijah and her family were still sleeping, the war came to their village. She and her husband, Farah, were awakened by gunfire and soldiers' shouts. They were horrified to witness the brutal murder of her parents and sister, who lived next door. Khadijah grabbed their two babies and Farah carried their five- and eight-year olds. They directed the eldest two children to stay with them and run as fast as they could.

In the panic and chaos of flight, Khadijah and her husband were separated. They never found each other. She crossed the border and lived for 13 years at a refugee camp until finally being approved for resettlement last year.

Khadijah is now a single mother living in the United States with three of her six children. She works as a hotel housekeeper, the children attend school, and the family is picking up the pieces of their lives.

Thousands more have fled to Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan, and India to escape the ruling Burmese military regime. The Tham Hin refugee camp, whose name literally means "temporary shelter," houses nearly 10,000 Karen Christian refugees in severely crowded conditions.

## HOPE AND HELP

Khadijah, Aynura, and Nwe, their families, and other vulnerable immigrants come to us from all over the world with boundless hope. With the help and hard work of caring, committed people, they are given the chance to start their lives over in the United States.

*For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever. Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you. Put them in fear, O LORD; let the nations know that they are only human (Psalm 9:18-20).*



COUNTRY OF ORIGIN  
**TURKEY**

CURRENT HOME  
**UNITED STATES**

# AYNURA

Aynura arrived in the United States a few months ago with her husband, Viktor, and their five children. With the help of a Lutheran social service agency and sponsorship by a Lutheran congregation, Aynura has been able to settle into her new community and adjust to her new life. She and Viktor have both taken English courses and have found jobs to help establish their roots in America.

## CRITICAL TIME FOR NEWCOMERS

This is a critical time in our nation's history, as our leaders debate whether America's doors will remain open to newcomers. The world's immigrants and refugees need our prayers. They need our voices. They need our welcoming embrace.

As Christians we bear a special responsibility to live out the word of God shared in Matthew 25:35-36: *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something*



*to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

As you gather around the warm hearth with your loved ones this Christmas, remember that Jesus, too, was a refugee. We are called by him to welcome the stranger, to care for the vulnerable, and to stand with those unjustly accused—ever hopeful. 🌿

**Cassandra A. Champion** is the director for communications at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS).

Through a national network of individuals, congregations, local agencies, and partner organizations, LIRS leads the effort to create welcoming communities in America for immigrants and refugees. It resettles refugees and assists asylum seekers who flee war and persecution in their homelands in search of peace, justice, and opportunity. LIRS works to find loving homes for unaccompanied refugee children, who arrive without parents and without protection. LIRS reunites families who are torn apart by our broken immigration system. It advocates for fair and just treatment, and seeks alternatives to detention for those who are incarcerated during their immigration proceedings. Since 1939, LIRS has welcomed the most vulnerable immigrants to our shores—bringing new hope and new life to America's newcomers, rebuilding families and homes, providing safety and protection, and lifting up the voices of uprooted people. For more information about the work of LIRS, visit [www.lirs.org](http://www.lirs.org).

# NWE



COUNTRY OF ORIGIN  
**MYANMAR**

CURRENT HOME  
**THAILAND**

Nwe, age 15, lives with her parents and four brothers and sisters. She was five years old when the family fled their burned and battered village, seeking protection.

For the past 10 years—most of her life—Nwe has lived in the Tham Hin camp. Her family has applied for resettlement to the United States, but awaits our government's intervention. Unfortunately, the family's hopes are stymied by U.S. policies on "material support" for certain refugees and asylum seekers.

Before the family was forced to flee, Nwe's father had resisted the brutal military junta, fighting with the Karen National Liberation Army. His opposition to the existing government brought him under broadly defined "material support" provisions of the Patriot Act and the Real ID Act. Because he fought against the standing government, he was labeled a terrorist. Opposition to brutal military regimes and totalitarian dictatorships, even those the United States opposes, can disqualify a refugee for entry into our country. Many thousands of refugees and asylum seekers are thus disqualified from the protection they deserve.





HEALTH WISE

## Affordable Health Care: A Christmas Wish

by Molly M. Ginty

### In Pender, Nebraska,

Teresa Kai lost her Medicaid coverage due to government policy changes. A part-time cook with little savings, she could no longer pay for the drugs she needed for diabetes, high blood pressure, clinical depression, and asthma.

In Boise, Idaho, Martie Balmer needed a bladder operation. A self-employed hairstylist with no health insurance, she couldn't afford the \$25,000 to have the surgery near home. She had to travel to Southeast Asia to have the procedure done for 10 percent of what it would have cost her in the United States.

In New York, Jill Zimmerman contracted a bacterial infection that required six days of hospital care. Her health insurance policy, provided by the YMCA where she worked as a yoga instructor, would not cover the full \$28,000 bill. Three years later, Zimmerman is still struggling to pay off the \$8,000 balance.

Across the United States, stories like these are becoming more common as women of all economic levels—from low-income-aid recipients to middle-class working women—cannot afford health insurance or lose the benefits on which they have come to rely.

Americans over age 65 can qualify for government-sponsored Medicare, but a growing number of younger Americans are losing health coverage that is already spotty or inadequate. With 46 million Americans living without health insurance, more and more women are making affordable medical care their number-one Christmas wish.

"America's health care crisis is one that affects women disproportionately," says Judy Waxman, vice president for health and reproductive rights at the National Women's Law Center. "Women use more health care than men do, especially during their reproductive years. But women are less likely to be able to afford coverage because they are poorer, earning 76.5 cents for every dollar men make. And women are less likely to get health insurance through work because they are more likely to work part-time."

Surveys by the Kaiser Family Foundation show that women are 30 percent more likely than men to have a health condition that requires ongoing treatment, 50 percent more likely to delay or go without treatment because they can't afford it, and 60 percent more likely not to fill a prescription because of its cost.

Like Teresa Kai, 9 percent of American women rely on Medicaid, which covers low-income Americans with disabilities or dependent children. Funded by state and federal governments, Medicaid faces budget cuts on both fronts. According to the National Women's Law Center, a growing number of states are requiring recipients to pay for prescription drugs, and doctor co-pays. And according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, the federal government and all 50 states have recently cut Medicaid programs.

Like Jill Zimmerman, 64 percent of women have health insurance through their jobs. But the cost of this type of insurance has spiked 73 percent since

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This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls.



2000, prompting many businesses to buy cheaper, high-deductible plans or to stop offering coverage to workers altogether. Women who lose employer-sponsored health insurance can buy private insurance (which 6 percent of U.S. women have). But these policies cost the individual 10 to 15 times as much as employer-sponsored policies: \$200 to \$600 per month for individuals and \$800 to \$1,200 per month for families.

Like Martie Balmer, 19 percent of women have no health insurance at all. For the uninsured, America's health care crisis poses the biggest threat. According to a 2005 Harvard University study, medical bills are the leading cause of bankruptcy in the United States. And according to the Washington-based Institute of Medicine, lack of health insurance leads to 18,000 unnecessary deaths per year.

Why are both public and private insurance faltering, leaving one-sixth of the population without coverage? Expensive technologies are becoming the standard of care. Health maintenance organizations (HMOs) are cutting corners to make profits. Doctors' costs of doing business, in particular malpractice insurance premiums, are rising. Baby boomers are aging and developing health problems that further strain the health-care system. All of this translates into higher costs for the consumer.

"In addition, our health care system is an employer-based model dating from

World War II," says Alina Salganicoff, Kaiser Family Foundation's director of women's health policy. "It wasn't designed for people who switch jobs as often as they do now, any more than Medicaid was designed to fill its current function of serving all the poor."

How can we solve the problem? Some say we should expand Medicare to cover every American. Others recommend a national program modeled on Massachusetts' new health plan, which mandates health insurance for every resident. Some promote Health Savings Accounts, which allow policyholders to save money for health expenses tax-free. Others recommend enrolling every citizen in the federal employee health benefits program.

Until America addresses its health-care coverage crisis, experts say every woman must look out for herself. If you're uninsured, check [www.cms.hhs.gov/home/medicaid.asp](http://www.cms.hhs.gov/home/medicaid.asp) to see if you qualify for public coverage. If you already have insurance, read the fine print so you know whether your coverage is best for you and whether you need to switch plans.

"Until my health insurance policy failed to cover my care, I had no idea I was underinsured," says Jill Zimmerman. "Thousands of dollars in unpaid bills later, I only wish that I had taken charge and taken time to do my homework." ❁

**Molly M. Ginty** lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.

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*For more information:*

**Kaiser Family Foundation**  
"Health Insurance Coverage  
& the Uninsured"  
[www.kff.org/uninsured](http://www.kff.org/uninsured)

**National Women's Law  
Center**  
Visit [www.nwlc.org](http://www.nwlc.org) and  
search for "Women and  
Health Insurance"



# THE COMING OF *Christ*

by Julie K. Aageson





As we look forward to Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, many of us long for ways to clarify, re-interpret, and celebrate the deeper meaning of these three distinct seasons of the Christmas cycle. Perhaps at no other time do we experience so intensely the weight of expectations and traditions, the clash of secular and sacred in our commerce-driven culture, and our own yearning to celebrate anew Christ's coming in the birth of Jesus. Among the treasures and contradictions of our experience of these seasons, we are looking and longing for the promised Christ, the God who continually breaks into human history offering wholeness and bringing new life.

## ADVENT | Time to Hope

**IT IS ADVENT.** In the northern hemisphere, the sun rises late and low in the southern sky, the days are short and cold, the night is long and dark. All the world waits during this dormant winter season, hoping for new life. How desperately we need Advent! In our fast-moving, instant-gratification culture, Advent calls for waiting, for patience. It is something we have come to know as necessary for a new beginning. We yearn for the promise of new life, for light in the darkness, for the source of our life, the promised Christ.

The Lukan texts for Advent describe signs in the sun, moon, and stars, and a palpable sense of fear and foreboding—a world gone awry. Natural disasters are coupled with war and violence. We hear the wilderness cries of John the Baptist reverberating in wildernesses of our own: “Prepare the way! If you have two coats, share with one who has none and whoever has food, do likewise.” Into this cacophony of chaotic images and harsh voices comes Advent’s grace: “Wait! Watch! Hope! One is coming

who will bring light into this darkness, one who makes all things new.” Chaos is neither the final word nor the way we are meant to live. The Advent texts proclaim a world desperately in need of transformation and they promise a God who is with us now and always.

Advent reminds us of our human yearning for God-time, waiting, hoping, longing for God’s coming in human flesh to offer our wounded lives and our wounded world the healing power of resurrection. During these short, dark days, we wait and watch. The lighted Advent wreath is a visual reminder of holy time. It brings light into the darkness, marks the passing of the days, and reminds us that the whole world waits with longing for the coming of God. O come, O come, Emmanuel.

### THESE RESOURCES CAN HELP US KNOW ADVENT AS A TIME TO HOPE

- > *Hasten the Kingdom—Praying the O Antiphons of Advent* by Mary Winifred is a compilation of prayers, images, and time for reflection on the meaning of Advent. (Liturgical Press, 1997)
- > For Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, Gertrud Mueller Nelson’s book, *To Dance with God*, describes the rituals, symbols, and ceremony of the Christmas season so that our celebrating can be authentic and revelatory of God’s presence in the coming of Jesus. (Paulist Press, 1986)

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Most of the books mentioned in this article can be purchased new or used on-line from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). If a publisher’s Web address is given, the book can be purchased directly from the publisher. Or you can try your local or synodical library. Check out *We Recommend* on page 37 for an easy way to find books in libraries near you.



# CHRISTMAS | Grace upon Grace

IT IS CHRISTMAS AND GOD HAS COME TO DWELL WITH US! More than anything else, Christmas is the revelation of God's overwhelming and extravagant love. The generosity of God in Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the fulfillment of our deepest hopes. He is light in our darkness, the embodiment of the mystery of God, full of grace and truth. This incarnation of God in human flesh is the great exchange—God becoming one of us, taking on our humanity in Christ even as we, in all our human-ness, are made “bearers of God.” This is Emmanuel! God with

us! The kingdom of God here and now! The servant Christ who will embrace death and suffering on our behalf, pouring himself out for the life of the world!

This God who comes to us is Jesus the Christ, peace-maker, pain-bearer, life-giver, the one who establishes justice and loves righteousness. In the grace that is God in Jesus Christ, we are blessed with the immeasurable love of God and invited to bear Christ to the world, to be little Christs—food and drink, hope and healing—for one another.

One Christmas Day several

years ago, our family took a turn serving the meal at the local homeless shelter. It wasn't our typical Christmas dinner but for each of us, it was a poignant reminder of what it means to be food and drink for one another. Christmas always provides opportunities for sharing God's grace and generosity, for being with one another, for truly bearing Christ to the world.

*Christ the path and Christ the door.*

*Christ the bread and welcome cup.*

*Christ the word and cleansing bath.*

*Christ the robe and Christ the fire.*

*Christ the dawn and blazing sun.*

*Christ the light and Christ the star.*

*Christ the beginning and the end.*

*Christ our life and Christ our home.*

(From *Welcome Home: Scripture, Prayers, and Blessings for the Household: Year of Matthew* by Samuel Torvend, Augsburg Fortress, 1995.)

Christmas, grace upon grace!  
Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

## THESE RESOURCES CAN HELP REVEAL THE EXTRAVAGANT LOVE OF GOD IN CHRIST—GRACE UPON GRACE

- > Susan Briehl's *Come, Lord Jesus* is a beautiful collection of prayers and meditations for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. (Augsburg Fortress, 1996)
- > “Overwhelming Love of God,” a video by Brennan Manning, illustrates the outrageous love of God, a love that leads to action. Manning's compelling and passionate witness to God's love is a word of grace to all who view it. (Seraphim Communications, [www.seracomm.com](http://www.seracomm.com), 1997)
- > “Behold the Vulnerable God” and “The Spiritual Meaning of Christmas” on John Shea's *Christmas Stories* CD explore themes in Matthew and Luke through contemporary and ancient stories. (ACTA Publications, [www.actapublications.com](http://www.actapublications.com), 1992)



# EPIPHANY | Transformation of the World

IT IS EPIPHANY, THE MANIFESTATION OF THE MYSTERY THAT THE BABY BORN IN BETHLEHEM IS INDEED GOD WITH US! On January 6, we come to Twelfth Night and the Feast of the Epiphany. It's our final great day for celebrating this mystery. Epiphany is about light, the Light of the world, Jesus the Christ who brings light into darkness, hope and healing to a suffering world. It's a time for shouting to all the world that the Messiah has come among us, that God, the Christ, is in our midst. It's a time for proclaiming the Son of Righteousness, the one who calls us to the transforming work of justice and mercy, peacemaking, "Christ-making" so that—again—we ourselves become little Christs in order that a wounded world may know Christ in and through us.

If we can prevail against the customs of our time—taking the

calendar of the church year as the lens it's meant to be—we will celebrate all 12 days of Christmas. Our cultural bent for "jumping the gun"—decorating trees and homes, hosting Christmas parties and holding concerts and pageants in early December—has left us so exhausted that by December 26 or 27, Christmas for us is over. We need look no further than our own neighborhoods, where Christmas trees already lie at curb sides and trash cans overflow with empty boxes and torn wrapping paper.

In many European countries, Epiphany was marked by the custom of blessing the home. It's a way of inviting God's presence and acknowledging our homes as God's home. House blessings, like other rituals, can remind us that the brilliance of the Epiphany star—"God with us"—makes our homes and our

hearts places of refuge, havens of peace and goodwill.

In the Epiphany issue of *Liturgy: The Journal of the Liturgical Conference* (summer 1997), author Jeffrey VanderWilt reminds us, "The Epiphany of Jesus in our lives . . . suggests that we have seen not just a baby boy, not just a mystical prophet, not a king and certainly not a 'superstar.' The Epiphany of our lives is like some sudden 'de-cloaking' of the Spirit of the Risen Christ who lurks behind and beneath, over and beside, in and through everything we see and experience—without exception."

The coming of Christ at Christmastime is the very hope of the world that we all long for. The God who made the universe "lurks behind and beneath, over and beside, in and through everything." This Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, may we all be awakened to the true work of this sacred season, the transformation of the world and the reformation of our own hearts. God be with us all! 🌸

**Julie K. Aageson** is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.

## THESE RESOURCES CAN HELP US LIVE THE MEANING OF EPIPHANY

- > *Winter: Celebrating the Season in a Christian Home* by Peter Mazar transforms the ordinary things of this season into extraordinary signs of God's presence. (Liturgy Training Publications, 1996)
- > A treasury of prayers, reflections, and celebrations, *Christ is Coming: Celebrating Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany* by Theresa Cotter can give shape and meaning to each of these seasons. (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997)
- > *O Marvelous Exchange: Daily Reflections for Christmas and Epiphany* is a small book of meditations by John McIlhone about the mystery of Christ's incarnation—with light for the question, "what are we to be?" (Liturgical Press, 1991)





## BIBLE STUDY

HOPE IN GOD IN TIMES OF SUFFERING SESSION 4

# Suffering as the Consequence of Sin

by Terry and Faith Fretheim

### TEXTS USED IN THIS SESSION

Jeremiah 14:16; 6:19	Mark 15:34
Galatians 6:7	Matthew 27:46
Amos 3:2	Psalms 31:5
Genesis 3:14-19	Luke 23:46
Genesis 1:26-27	Psalms 69:21
Genesis 2:4-25	Psalms 22:15
Psalms 51:1-12	John 19:28
Psalms 32:1, 3, 5	1 Chronicles 21:1
Exodus 1:8-14; 15:2	Matthew 4:1-11; 8:28-34
Psalms 22:1	Luke 11:14-23

## Overview

In this session we explore the types of suffering that are associated with sin. They include suffering as the consequence of our own sin, the consequence of the sins of others, and the tragic effects of our sin on the very structures of our life together.

Theme verses

### Jeremiah 14:16

“... and I will pour out their wickedness upon them.”

### Exodus 1:13-14

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor.

## Opening

**Hymn** “When Israel Was in Egypt’s Land”  
(*With One Voice* 670)

## Prayer

Who’s here today?

As you come together today, lift up an effect of our sin that hinders our life together or that hurts our fragile environment.

### Suffering as the consequence of our own sin

We know from experience that sin can cause suffering. If a driver is reckless and runs another car off the road, there will be suffering. If a person tells a lie, the effects of that lie will most likely include suffering; think of others’ hurt feelings or the remorse of the person who told the lie.

We may not as often think of a community sinning (for example, a family, a nation, perhaps even a congregation), but this certainly does happen. Consider what happened between the Hutu and Tutsi people in Rwanda several years ago. Both communities sinned and suffered.



• **What experiences of suffering can you name that were caused by the sin of one person?**

• **What other experiences of suffering as a consequence of a community's sin can you think of?**

Suffering as a consequence of our sin does not happen because God pulls some kind of trigger when someone sins. Rather, it occurs because God has made a world in which actions (whether sinful or not) have consequences; this is often called the *moral order*.

How is God involved in this moral order? We cannot speak with precision about this, but the Bible gives us some clues. God is not aloof or indifferent to our sin, and so God will see to the consequences, which may include suffering. Some scholars use the image of God as midwife—the baby is going to be born whether the midwife is there or not, but the midwife facilitates the birth process.

Think of God's words in Jeremiah 14:16, "I will pour out their wickedness upon them." Note that God works with what is already present in the situation. God does not produce something new, such as a penalty, and impose it on the situation. Rather, God sees to the consequences that the people's own sins have produced.

Another example to consider is Jeremiah 6:19, where God says, "I am going to bring disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes." The image of fruit-bearing is helpful; sin is the seed and the consequences are the fruit of the sinful deeds. The consequences grow out of the deeds. Galatians 6:7 uses the same image: "you reap whatever you sow."

• **How would you explain the relationship between "what you sow" and "what you reap"? Can you think of other metaphors for sin and its consequences in our lives?**

• **How might these proverbs be helpful in thinking about the relationship between sin and suffering?**

• **How might these proverbs be unhelpful?**

Some Bible translations use the word "punishment" for these consequences. But this translation is problematic, not least because biblical Hebrew does not have a word for "punish" or "punishment." God does not introduce anything that is not already present in the people's sin and its effect. A literal translation of Amos 3:2, for example, would not be "therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (NRSV), but "therefore I will visit your iniquities upon you." Once again, the people's sins produce the effects, and God sees to the connection between sin and consequence.

That suffering is often the consequence of sin is clear throughout the Bible, beginning with Genesis 3. When Adam and Eve sin, suffering follows. Consider these examples: After the fall, God tells Eve that pain in childbirth will be "increased" and "the man shall rule over you" (3:16). The man is told, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (3:19).

It is usually thought that God does not hereby prescribe these effects for all time. Rather, God is gracious; God *describes* what the effects of their sins will be and sees to the connection between sin and consequence. In other words, God does not *send* the suffering; God oversees the moral order in which sins have consequences, including suffering.

What, then, should we do about that suffering? We certainly should not sit back and say we can do nothing; after all, the suffering has come about because of what individuals have done. No, we are to work to overcome the effects of sin and seek to alleviate the suffering.

And our work to overcome the effects of sin that God announced in Genesis 3:14–19 has borne fruit, especially in the last hundred years or so. Think of the medical, social, and technological advances that relieve pain in childbirth, seek equality between men and women, and produce labor-saving tools for the production and preparation of food.

Such efforts to overcome suffering that is a

consequence of sin are increasingly widespread and effective. Responding to suffering in such a way is to work toward God's original intentions for creation (as in Genesis 1:26–27 and 2:4–25). We can be sure that God remains involved in the consequences that our sins have produced, using them to bring about good in the lives of individuals and communities.

**> Can you think of examples of a situation in which God was at work in the consequences of suffering caused by the sin of an individual or a community and used them to bring about good?**

God could be said to be responsible for such suffering, but not directly. God is certainly responsible for suffering in the sense that God created a world where people can make decisions that are sinful and have severe consequences. For example, God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; God told them that if they did, there would be adverse consequences. They did, and there were. Read Genesis 2:16–17 and then 3:11–12.

God could have chosen not to provide such choices for human beings, of course. But what kind of life would we have if we were simply programmed not to be able to make choices; if we could not resist the will of God? What kind of relationship would God and human beings have in such a world?

Or God could have created a world where sin never resulted in suffering, where its consequences were painless. Why didn't God create a world like that? But if God hadn't put the moral order in place, wouldn't there be much more suffering than there is? That is, if sin had no consequences, then sin and evil would go unchecked in the life of the world. There would be much worse suffering in such a world, wouldn't there? Keep this in mind as we go on to discuss suffering that is the consequence of sin not our own.

Suffering as a consequence of our sin is not inevitable or immediate, of course; the world does not work that neatly (recall Jeremiah 12:1, “the treacherous thrive”). But, in general, sin has consequences that include suffering.

What should our response be?

How are we to respond when it is our own sin that has brought about the suffering? The most basic response is repentance and confession of our sin. The book of Psalms has a number of passages that help us articulate this confession. For example, Psalm 51:1–12 constitutes a plea to God to “cleanse me from my sin” and “create in me a clean heart.”

Psalm 32:3 speaks of the suffering of the unrepentant sinner: “When I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.” Then the psalmist sings of the forgiveness granted by God upon confession (32:5) and the joy that follows (32:1).

At the same time, it may be that our sin has weighed so heavily upon our lives, and upon the lives of others, that further healing will be needed. And so we may need to seek out, say, God-given medical or psychological resources to be of help in our healing or in the healing of others whom we may have hurt. And that brings us to the next point.

### **Suffering as the consequence of the sins of other people**

We often experience suffering not because of something we have done, but because of what other people have done to us. Sometimes we know who these people are, and sometimes we don't know who they are.

**> Have you ever suffered because of what other people have done to you?**

**> Think about and discuss which is easier to see: the consequence of our sin or the consequences of someone else's sin in our own life.**



When the Israelites were in Egypt, they were suffering because of the sins of the Egyptians, who “made their lives bitter with hard service” and were “ruthless” (Exodus 1:8–14). And God responded to this situation not by advising the Israelites to get used to it, but by calling Moses to lead them out of that suffering. This text makes it clear that the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt was not the will of God for them. Indeed, God calls Moses to get them out of there! The result of God’s work of delivering the Israelites from Egypt is named “salvation” in Exodus 15:2 (the Lord “has become my salvation”). In other words, God’s salvation of the people here is more than forgiveness; it is deliverance from oppression and abuse.

Most people would say that the September 11 catastrophe was an act carried out by wicked individuals against the people of the United States. Thousands suffered because of these wicked actions. Much healing has been needed and continues to be needed by many who suffered through no fault of their own.

Often when we suffer at the hands of other people, we wonder where God was and why God did not deliver us.

**> *Think of those whom you have known who have suffered, not because of sins they committed, but because of the sins of other people. What questions about God were raised up in prayer?***

The book of Psalms gives us resources for just such situations of suffering because of what others have done to us. We have called attention to the penitential psalms already in this session. In addition to those psalms, more than 50 other psalms, called *laments of the innocent sufferer*, speak to such suffering situations. We looked briefly at the questions in two of these psalms in Session 1 (Psalms 13 and 22). These psalmists often cry out to God, voicing questions to God, lamenting their situation, and calling for relief.

These psalms cover a multitude of situations of suffering visited upon the psalmist. They are not often clear about the specifics of the situation, but they probably included such things as sickness, persecution, injustice, and abuse. We will take a closer look at these psalms in the next session.

**> *How have you voiced your laments to God when you have suffered because of what other people have done to you? What did you say to God?***

Jesus quoted three lament psalms in his words from the cross, as he suffered and died at the hands of others.

–Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46).

–Psalm 31:5, “Into your hand I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

–Psalm 69:21 (and Psalm 22:15), “I am thirsty” (John 19:28).

Jesus’ use of these psalms of the innocent sufferer demonstrates an important truth. In going to the cross, Jesus deeply identified with those who suffer, with those who have been violated by the sins of other people. Jesus lived and died not only to save us from our sins, but also to heal us of our hurts, often the result of acts committed by other people against us.

### **Suffering as the tragic effects of human sin over time**

We all belong to communities that have a long history of sin. And we suffer because of that. The effects of such human sin over time are integrated into the very structures of our life together—family, community, congregation, nation, and world. We refer to these realities with such words as *racism*, *sexism*, *classism*, and *ageism*. These realities are more than sinful acts by individuals; they have become a part of the very fabric of the communities to which we belong. We are born into such

a world. We will get caught up in the ongoing effects. And we will suffer because of them—some of us more than others. Even more, each of us will make our own contribution to this tragic history and therefore we will contribute to the suffering of others in generations yet to come, directly and indirectly.

- > Have you or others you know had experiences that could be considered results of racism, sexism, ageism, or classism?**
- > What was your response to that experience?**
- > Can you think of words spoken, thoughts thought, or deeds done by you or others that may have contributed to the persistence of such sinfulness in our society?**

The cumulative effects of our sinful words and deeds over time are so deep and pervasive that we often call them *evil*. Sometimes this evil seem to be embodied in particular individuals. One can trace through history a long line of people whose deeds are so terrible that such words as “sinful” and “bad” are inadequate to describe them. Only the word “evil” seems adequate for such individuals, from the Pharaoh in Exodus to Hitler, from Nero to Stalin. *Evil* often seems to mean sinfulness jacked up several notches to malice or depravity or perversity. Such people become “anti-God” in almost everything they do and say, and as we can see, have caused considerable suffering. Think of the genocidal actions carried out against the Israelites by Pharaoh, those of Hitler in the Holocaust, or more recently, someone like Mugabe in Zimbabwe, or the attempted genocide in Rwanda.

- > Think together about such individuals and ways in which their evil has caused so much suffering through the centuries. Do you know of anyone who has suffered, directly or indirectly, because of the activities of such evil people?**

## **> How might we speak and act in ways that can overcome the suffering that such evil people have perpetrated?**

From another perspective, evil is so pervasive that it seems to have taken on a life of its own, independent of individuals. We often refer to this kind of anti-God force as demonic, using such words as “devil” and “Satan.” The Old Testament does not often speak of the demonic. Certain texts mention an accusing member of God’s angelic court called “the satan” (you’ll hear more about this in Session 6 on Job). But most scholars do not believe that this figure is to be equated with the Satan or devil who appears later. Texts such as 1 Chronicles 21:1 give evidence of an emerging understanding of such anti-God forces that oppose the purposes of God for the world. The New Testament speaks of the demonic more often and thinks of Satan in more personal terms. The Scripture recognizes that there are evil forces in the world that are other than human, oppose God’s purposes, and cause considerable suffering.

- > Reflect on ways in which you think about the devil and its work in the world.**
- > How have you have heard other Christians speak about the devil?**

Sometimes we can think too much about the devil’s work in the world. For example, we may fall into the trap of blaming everything bad that happens on the devil. We have all heard the phrase, “The devil made me do it.” This is a way of trying to evade responsibility for the sin and suffering we visit upon others by pointing fingers at the devil. When Jesus was tempted by the devil (see Matthew 4:1–11), he resisted the devil’s powers and sent the devil away. Jesus shows us that the devil can be resisted and, when we belong to Christ, his powers of resistance are ours as well.



Suffering that results from the work of the devil is clearly not the will of God for us. We can see this especially in the work of Jesus. Jesus' casting out demons shows that there are anti-God forces at work in the world (see Matthew 8:28–34; Luke 11:14–23). Jesus works to rid people's lives of the suffering caused by such demonic work. God is and will be at work in and through Jesus' followers—individuals of faith and communities of faith—to cleanse the world of suffering caused by demonic powers at work among us.

How might you think of demon-possession in the world today? Might we use other words for this reality? Some people might think of extreme forms of mental illness. But what would be the danger of thinking too easily about the mentally ill in these terms? Others think of individuals whose lives have become so evil that they seem under the control of demonic forces (think, again, of such people as Hitler). This seems to be a more fruitful line of thinking.

### Closing today's session

We hope that today's session has given you much food for thought and discussion, far beyond this time

you have shared together in study. Our prayer for each of you is that you create an atmosphere, wherever you are, that allows for questions, discussion, and responsiveness to each others' and the world's hurts and sufferings.

**Hymn** "Goodness is Stronger than Evil"  
(*Worship Boldly*, p. 101)

### Prayer

### Looking ahead to Session 5

Laments, a particular group of Psalms, give us words to say in a time of suffering, and a structure in which to say them. They were used by the Israelites to give voice to their hurts and grief—a helpful thing to do! We will work with these laments and suggest that they are much needed in our world today. ☸

**Terry Fretheim** is the Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. **Faith** is a retired staff member of Women of the ELCA.

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## Share the good news

In addition to its regular Bible study, *Lutheran Woman Today* offers many articles of hope and healing, growth and inspiration. It is a magazine meant for sharing. If one of the stories touches you, or if you feel an article will speak to a friend, share it. This season, give a gift that will renew and strengthen. One year (10 issues) is only \$12— a great value.

Spread the word—call **800-328-4648** to order a gift subscription or go to [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org) to learn more.

# JESUS WITH US

by Kathryn Sime

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." (Matthew 1:23)*

At Christmas, we celebrate God made flesh, God with us. On that first Christmas, Jesus, Emmanuel, was found among the poor and lowly. Today, Jesus is with the 800 million people who suffer from chronic hunger and poverty. Jesus is with the 5 million children under five who will die this year of hunger-related causes. Jesus is with all those who live with the silent disaster of chronic hunger and poverty, and Jesus is with all those who walk with the poor and hungry on their journey to health and wholeness.



## Jesus is with Rose

Rose Makimwero, 31, of Rakai, Uganda, is living with HIV/AIDS. She contracted HIV from her husband, who has since died. Rose is

bringing up their four children all alone now. She had HIV for several years before the symptoms of AIDS emerged a few years ago. Until then, Rose had been able to support her family by growing and selling bananas, but this labor-intensive work had to stop as she became weaker. The family home was in poor repair and the roof leaked. The health of Rose's family was at risk and their future looked bleak.

Fortunately, Rose found a connection to the community AIDS program of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), supported by gifts from ELCA World Hunger and its Stand With Africa efforts. Counselors provided the funds and labor to build a better home for Rose's family. "I was overwhelmed with joy," Rose told us. To help supplement the family's income, Rose received the gift of two goats. The goats' first offspring will be given back to the LWF to help support another family living with AIDS. Goats are particularly helpful because they are easy to care for, so Rose's children can take care of

them and still attend school.

"Now, when I am sick and weak, I have hope and know that even when it rains, I can sleep comfortably," said Rose. "I am grateful for the LWF and pray for my dear God to bless them and continue supporting them."



## Jesus is with Joyce

Joyce proudly met us at the entrance to her home in Lyomatide, Uganda. Joyce, over 80, is guardian of her daughter's three sons. Her daughter and son-in-law both died of AIDS years ago. At first, the family lived in a poorly constructed house. "During the rainy season, I gathered the children in a corner and held them so it wouldn't rain on them!" Although she had few resources of her own, Joyce did her best to take care of her young grandsons.

But Joyce had more resources than she knew. Joyce sought help from the LWF, who helped rebuild her house and brought gifts of household items, including beds and mattresses. In a joint Lutheran World Relief (LWR) and LWF



project, supported by ELCA World Hunger and Stand With Africa, the family received a water tank and rainwater catchment system, which her grandson Alex, 15, demonstrated. With this new, more efficient way to conserve water, the family is better able to meet the challenges of seasonal drought.

"We don't have parents, but as we are in this comfortable house, we have hope for the future," said Alex. "We are very grateful because life has improved." Alex is able to go to secondary school through a fund set up by LWF-Uganda staff. He wants to be an engineer and takes his studies seriously.



### Jesus is with Ahmed

Every year, when the rainy season arrived in Ethiopia's northeastern Afar Desert region, the Wama River would overflow its banks. In the dry season, residents lived as nomadic pastoralists, roaming the arid countryside with their herds of camels, cattle, goats, and sheep in search of

water. This way of life meant limited access to health care and education for many in this region already beset by drought and poverty.

But today, said Ahmed Datto Lalli, a community spokesperson, life in the Wama River valley has greatly changed. With support from the LWF-Ethiopia, and through gifts from ELCA World Hunger Appeal, this community now benefits from a river diversion project: a concrete dam that reroutes some of the river's water to irrigation canals. Now, water is available for agriculture through most of the year, allowing more than 600 households to build sustainable livelihoods.

LWF's Wama River diversion project means more than just saving water; it has transformed the people's lives, explained Ahmed. LWF trained leaders in more effective agricultural practices, gender equity awareness, natural resource conservation, and more balanced farming strategies.

"In the past, we just counted herds. Now, we are told that it is better to have fewer animals and more crops," he said. With more permanent homes and other structures, this once roaming community has taken root and is building its own stronger future. "You have taught us how to live together instead of being scattered," said Ahmed.

Ahmed was visibly excited about

the future of his people. "In the future when you come, you will see big crops here. You will be amazed!"

As we walk with those who live with chronic poverty, hunger, and disease, we are blessed by their courage and perseverance, knowing that Jesus is with them. Gifts to ELCA World Hunger and Stand With Africa are gifts of the heart that let our neighbors know that they do not walk alone. Through your generosity, we help bring food to those who hunger, clean water to those who thirst, and we stand with those who struggle to survive. 🌿

**Kathryn Sime** is director of the ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Appeal.

### Stand With Africa

In 2001, Stand With Africa began as a three-year campaign of the ELCA World Hunger Program, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod World Relief, and Lutheran World Relief. It is now an ongoing emphasis within ELCA World Hunger.

You can donate to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and Stand With Africa through Women of the ELCA. Make your check out to "Women of the ELCA" and note "ELCA World Hunger Appeal" or "ELCA Stand With Africa" on the memo line of the check. Send your check to Women of the ELCA, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694. You can also donate with a credit card on-line at [www.elca.org/giving](http://www.elca.org/giving), or by calling 800-638-3522.

# ALL WE WANT FOR CHRISTMAS ARE GOOD GIFTS

*by Sue Edison-Swift*

Martha is really into Christmas. She began selecting and making Christmas gifts months ago. Maria is intentional about observing Advent as well as celebrating Christmas. Her Christmas tree is put up on December 24 and not before. Monica is committed to a simple lifestyle. She focuses on “the reason for the season” and manages to get through Advent and Christmas without breaking a sweat or her bank account.

The Christmas story renews Myra’s passion to help people who are hungry. She steps up her charitable giving—both donating and volunteering—during Advent and Christmas. Mavis has a both/and relationship with the Christmas season. She looks forward to Christmas with both joy and dread. She celebrates Christmas both in the culture and in the church. At Christmastime she always feels that she does both too much and not enough.

Bless their good hearts, and ours, too, for no matter what our take on the season, during Advent and Christmas we tend to find ourselves

wanting. We want to respond with gratitude to the incredible gift of God made flesh . . . Jesus in the manger, Jesus in our lives. We want to acknowledge the love, care, and nurturing in our lives . . . family, friends, and a host of others. We want to make a difference in the world. We want the presents we give and receive to be good gifts.

## **ELCA Good Gifts**

Gift donations make good gifts, and the ELCA Good Gifts catalog makes charitable giving fun. The catalog helps you feel good—and do good—with gift donations to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and other ELCA ministries. Instead of a tie or slippers for dad, for example, you could donate \$50 to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal and give him a card suggesting that you’ve “given” him a goat. Maybe your daughter would appreciate the thought of a child being able to attend school for a year because of your \$100 gift. Here are some more ideas for making good use of the ELCA Good Gifts catalog.

- Send the ELCA Good Gifts Catalog to the people who wonder what to give you for Christmas.
- The four-page center spread of the ELCA Good Gifts Catalog (the “mini-catalog”) is available separately (in packages of 50), making it ideal for distributing to circle participants, Sunday school classes, and other congregation groups.
- Nurture a little “good gifts” competition. See which church group (the choir vs. the congregation council, for example) could raise the most money for ELCA World Hunger.
- Nurture a little “good gifts” cooperation. Challenge your women’s group or congregation to get together to donate the equivalent of one life-saving well, two milking cows, three micro-loans, four scholarships, and five squealing pigs!
- Have fun announcing your gift donation. Wrap up an empty gift box and add an ELCA World Hunger gift tag to the top. Or tuck one of the gift enclosure cards found at the end of the Good Gifts catalog into a Christmas card. Or send an e-card—[www.elca.org/ecards](http://www.elca.org/ecards)—to announce your Good Gift.

## **LWR Fair Trade Projects**

Lutheran World Relief’s Fair Trade Projects—chocolate, coffee, handcrafts—make lovely gifts and stocking stuffers. Learn more at [www.lwr.org/fairtrade](http://www.lwr.org/fairtrade).



## Alternative Giving Fair

Help others in the congregation give and get Good Gifts by mounting an Alternative Giving Fair. At the fair, make ELCA Good Gifts donations and sell fair trade goodies. E-mail [munger@elca.org](mailto:munger@elca.org) for more information and ideas.

## The Christmas Giving Tree

A Christmas Giving Tree can grace the narthex or be used for a display at an Alternative Giving Fair or other congregational event. Here are some ideas:

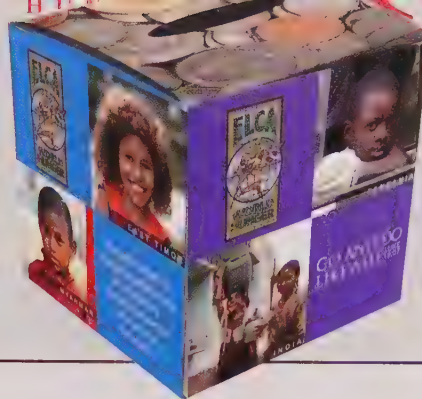
For each \$5 donation to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, the giver could add an ELCA World Hunger Appeal coin box, gift tag, or congregationally made ornament to decorate the tree.

For each \$5 donation to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, the giver could take a coin box, gift tag, or ornament off the tree to give to someone else.

Use as a reminder to give throughout the year by displaying at a "Christmas in July" event.

God bless our giving, God bless our receiving, God bless and multiply our gifts for the sake of the world. 🌿

**Sue Edison-Swift** directs communication and develops resources for the ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Appeal.



## How to Give

You can donate to an ELCA Good Gifts ministry through your women's group or congregation by noting the ministry's name and code number on the memo line of the check.

You can donate on-line now with a credit card at [www.elca.org/giving](http://www.elca.org/giving) or

[www.elca.org/goodgifts](http://www.elca.org/goodgifts) or by calling 800-638-3522. You can mail your donation (with or without the reply form in the catalog) by sending your check to Women of the ELCA/ELCA Good Gifts, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694.

## How to Order

**ELCA GOOD GIFTS CATALOG, MINI-CATALOG**  
[www.elca.org/goodgifts](http://www.elca.org/goodgifts)

Request the ELCA Good Gifts Catalog (ISBN 6-0002-0607-0) or mini-catalog (ISBN 6-0002-0608-9) by calling 800-328-4648 or visiting [www.augsburgfortress.org/elcahunger](http://www.augsburgfortress.org/elcahunger). Go to [www.elca.org/goodgifts](http://www.elca.org/goodgifts) to see the on-line catalog. Free. (Mini-catalogs are packed in sets of 50).

**ELCA WORLD HUNGER GIFT CARD, GIFT TAG**  
[www.elca.org/hunger/resources](http://www.elca.org/hunger/resources)

Use the Advent blue gift card (ISBN 6-0001-9705-5, one package has 10 cards and envelopes; free) or gift tag (ISBN 6-0002-1546-0, one package has 10 tags; free) to announce your gift donations to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal.

**A GREATER GIFT (SERRV) CATALOG**  
[www.lwr.org/handcraft](http://www.lwr.org/handcraft)

Request a catalog by calling 888-294-9660 or by visiting [www.lwr.org/handcraft/catrequest.asp](http://www.lwr.org/handcraft/catrequest.asp). Mention the LWR Handcraft Project when you order.

**FAIR TRADE COFFEE, TEA, COCOA**  
[www.lwr.org/coffee](http://www.lwr.org/coffee)

Order on-line at <http://equalexchange.stores.yahoo.net> or call 774-776-7340. Mention the LWR Coffee Project when you place your order.

**FAIR TRADE CHOCOLATE**  
[www.lwr.org/chocolate](http://www.lwr.org/chocolate)

Order on-line at <http://divine.serrv.org/divine/lwr/> or call 888-294-9660. Mention the LWR Chocolate Project when you place your order.



## WE RECOMMEND

## Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

### Need prayer?

An intercessory prayer network of ELCA congregations and other prayer groups in the U.S. and the Caribbean are ready and willing to pray for your needs. Simply make your request on the ELCA prayer Web site at [www.elca.org/prayer](http://www.elca.org/prayer).

Once your prayer request is submitted, the on-line manager contacts people in the prayer network. Not all congregations or groups are contacted with every request, but every prayer request receives prayer.

If your circle or congregation wants to join the network, see on-line instructions on submitting your registration to the network.

The site also offers prayer resources, devotions, and meditations.

To find out more about the Women of the ELCA Monday Prayer at Noon, visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org), click on the "What We Do" tab at top, then click on Monday Prayer at Noon under Quick Links on the right of the page.

### Act Boldly with beads

Women of the ELCA has created a bead project for you: an "act boldly" bookmark. It's fun to make, and even more fun in a group. This is a great project for a mid-winter unit gathering or retreat. It's a perfect intergenerational project too. Go to [www.womenoftheelca.org/resources](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/resources) and click on the theme-related link on the left side of the page. There you will find free downloadable directions that include a supply list and illustrations. It couldn't be simpler. Use the bookmark regularly as a reminder of


our commitment to act boldly. These are also quick and easy handmade Christmas gifts for all the bold women and girls on your shopping list.

### Find a book near you

*Lutheran Woman Today* articles often mention books and resources that might interest you, but you're not sure if you're ready to buy. Now, with a new tool WorldCat, on our award-winning Web site [www.lutheranwomantoday.org](http://www.lutheranwomantoday.org), you can find books, music, videos, articles and more either for download or loan at a library near you.

Simply search using the WorldCat link on our Web site to find resources near you. To test it, type in the title of Debra Farrington's book, *Unceasing Prayer: A Beginner's Guide* (or type in the author's name for all of her books). Once you click on the book title, enter your location information, and press enter. A list of libraries where the book can be found appears.

### Stewardshops available on-line

Stewardshops are skill-based workshops for stewardship leaders in congregations. A series of 10 hour-long programs are available for download, each designed to introduce and implement basic practices within the congregation. Each workshop addresses a specific stewardship skill. To download the resources, visit [www.elca.org/stewardship/stewardshops](http://www.elca.org/stewardship/stewardshops). For stewardship ideas specifically related to Women of the ELCA, visit [www.womenoftheelca.org/whatwedo](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/whatwedo) and click on Stewardship on the right under Quick Links. 





# God's math doesn't just add up.

## IT MULTIPLIES.

(John 6:1-14)



- 1 X \$30** feeds a child for a month
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**ELCA Good Gifts**

The Giving Catalog  
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



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## A MATTER OF

# LIFE & DEATH

by Mary Mortimore Dossin

My preparations for Christmas begin in the fall, when I paw with cold hands through the tumbling rock-hard bundles in the frozen poultry bins at our local grocery stores. I am looking for ducks, and they're always on the bottom. In past years I have had to find as many as three to have enough for the guests who gathered around our Christmas table. This year, one will be more than enough.

When both leaves are in, my dining room table—my favorite possession—seats 10 comfortably, 12 in a pinch. I set the table with an ivory damask tablecloth and the china I inherited from my mother-in-law. The room is lit by candles in the chandelier and candelabra, also given to me by my mother-in-law.

Through her gifts that surround us, my beloved mother-in-law is present with us, though she died 20 years ago. My own mother, also

gone, is there with us too. She was a faithful Christmas guest for years, fleeing a quiet Christmas in a California apartment with Dad—who didn't like to travel—sharing a Cornish hen and a yam for Christmas dinner. At our house, a continent away, she found her daughters and sons-in-law and grandsons and the festive mess of a holiday celebrated in the style of my husband's family, with abundance: an enormous over-decorated tree, a living room awash in toys and torn wrapping paper, a table laden with roast duck and other rich holiday foods.

Untimely deaths have thinned the crowd around that table too. A year ago, my sister's husband Tom was killed in a traffic accident just before Thanksgiving. Last summer, our dear friend and former pastor Karl died of cancer. Both Tom and Karl had gathered in the circle of light around our Christmas table

for years. Their widows, Ann and Diana, say they are unable to face Christmas at our house this year. It is hard standing on the edges of other people's happiness.

At Christmas, a celebration of a momentous birth, death seems an anomaly. How can it possibly coexist with caroling, nativity scenes, candlelight, and good cheer? In truth, death is not tangential to Christmas but essential to it. Christ's ultimate death, and what that death accomplished for us, is what it's all about.

The real danger at Christmas is not commercialization but sentimentality: making the familiar story a sweet tale that has nothing to do with life and death, and therefore has little to do with our own lives beyond a bright interlude in a dark winter. People of faith can discern the distinction between the celebration of the birth of Christ and the



other traditions that have grown up around it. It's easy, though, to slip into a complacent piety that denies the force and power of God's incarnation in Christ.

Years ago, I saw a small brass relief of the manger scene that appealed to me so much I had to make a rubbing of it. What attracted me to the depiction was Mary's position: flat on her back in front of the manger. That's more realistic than her kneeling posture in the usual nativity scenes. The birth of Christ can't have been as pretty and sweet as so many paintings make it seem. Childbirth is hard and messy, and experiencing it in the muck and stink of a stable could not have been tidy.

All of us have seen images of the Madonna and Child, on Christmas cards if nowhere else, that

make love look calm and restful. Mary almost invariably appears unhurried, serene. The baby Jesus is content and composed. However, Christ's love for us is not a pastel idyll but involves his bloody wounds and painful death. Both the beginning and the end of Christ's earthly life were arduous and dirty.

In between that celebrated birth and that eventual, horrible death, Jesus enjoyed the human happiness of gathering around the table with loved ones. We learn something about our own celebratory meals and those whom we miss at the table by knowing that Jesus spent the last evening before his crucifixion eating and drinking a Passover holiday meal with his disciples. Could there have been laughter, friendship, enjoyment that night even for Jesus, who alone understood what lay

ahead? His first miracle was turning water into wine for a joyous, days-long wedding celebration. After the resurrection, Christ shared a meal at Emmaus with two unknowing followers and cooked breakfast on the beach for his disciples.

Christmas means that we don't have to fight to save ourselves from sin and death, not that we could win such a battle ourselves. At great cost, Christ defeated evil and death for us, freeing us to live a life of love and laughter. It is fitting to celebrate God's emergence in human flesh by making the joy we share around the Christmas table truly "a foretaste of the feast to come," an everlasting feast with no empty chairs at the table. 🌿

**Mary Mortimore Dossin** lives with her husband, Ernie, on the shore of Lake Champlain in Chazy, N.Y.

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## GRACE NOTES

# Bold Over

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



When we launched this triennium 18 months ago with the "Act boldly" theme, I must admit I hesitated a bit. Could we pull it off? Could Lutheran women really act boldly? Could we overcome the stereotype that we are only about Bible studies, relief quilts, and Jello salad? And if we didn't pull it off, if our collective efforts were far less than bold, what then? Would others in the church nod and smile, thinking "I told you so"?

Yet here we are, midway through the triennium, and I have to ask. Are Lutheran women acting boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ? Yes, some certainly are.

We've invited you to share stories of bold women. For every bold woman story we receive, we receive five to 10 letters where it's clear that the writer doesn't quite get the meaning of the "Act boldly" theme. Usually these letters begin with: "I've decided to act boldly by writing to complain about . . ." Believe me, we are glad to know your complaints: We can't make improvements unless we recognize what doesn't work. But neither the "Act boldly" theme nor your baptism calls you to complain.

As baptized children of God, we are called to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed. We are called to serve all people, following Jesus' example. We are called to strive for justice and peace in all the earth. This baptism is serious business, so let me ask you some serious questions.

In the last 18 months, how have you moved out of your comfort zone and

proclaimed the good news of God in Christ in some new way? Have you told anyone how God has made a difference in your life? In the last 18 months, how have you served the outcast, the sick, the marginalized? In the last 18 months, what bold things have you done in the name of justice and peace? What have you done to bring peace to your family? How have you sought justice in your community? Can you name the five most pressing justice issues in your state? In North America? Can you name five countries where peace and justice are but fleeting memories of the elderly and but a far-off dream for the young?

Many of you have seen Ford Motor Company's new campaign featuring the theme "Bold Moves." In a news release, Ford's Cisco Codina says, "At the center of 'Bold Moves' are the choices people make every day about how to live their lives." The president of the advertising firm that developed the "Bold Moves" campaign added, "Bold Moves is so much more than a tag line change . . . It's a new way of thinking."

If this corporate giant can focus its energy on the life choices people make every day and can describe its new efforts as a new way of thinking, imagine how much more Lutheran women can do by acting boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ. My fear, however, is that Ford's "Bold Moves" will be more successful than our "Act boldly" efforts. I hope you prove me wrong. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

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The mission of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is to mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.



## SPREADING CHRISTMAS CHEER



From left to right are: Joy Carlson, Delores Ruge, Geri Tesch, Joyce Olsen, and Marge Krall.

Photo by Marie Nunn.

The outreach circle of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Vancouver, Washington, fills nearly 100 Christmas mugs with goodies for the annual party at a local assisted-living and retirement home for low-income residents. Additionally, women in the outreach and Dorcas circles (and anyone else who wants to help) assemble about 30 Christmas baskets for homebound and special-needs members of the church.

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AMEN!

## God with Us

by Catherine Malotky

### “Don’t touch! Hot!”

How many little ones have heard this warning and ignored it? Just as many as have nursed burned fingers. Disobedience . . . and . . . consequence.

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28b). How many generations have interpreted “have dominion” as *dominate* and “subdue” as *coerce*? Just as many as have paid the price—who have been humbled by the earth’s power and by our vulnerability as the earth gasps under our disregard for its delicate balance. What will our children and grandchildren inherit?

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). How many families have been destroyed by simmering anger? How many have dissolved for lack of honesty? Just as many as have been lonely. In such spiritual poverty we cannot thrive.

We pay for our errors. Fear hobbles us. Resentments poison us. Suspicion isolates us. We pay. But so do you, God.

O LORD our God, ruler of the universe, you should have lost patience with us eons ago. To have created so well, to have blessed so thoroughly, and now this—you must grieve your efforts, at least sometimes. We do, in our best moments, reflect back to you what you had hoped for in us. But we have so many other moments, God, when we are petty, small-

minded, and grasping—not at all gracious as you might have imagined.

You should be turning away, deflecting our attempts to reach out to you, playing down the significance of these creatures you’ve made. Yet, in this season, we remember how you do the opposite. Rather than distance yourself, you come to us.

You come not as a regal presence or spirit of mystery. You come as a child, as we all once were. You come as a child, flesh like our flesh and bone like our bone. You come, one of us.

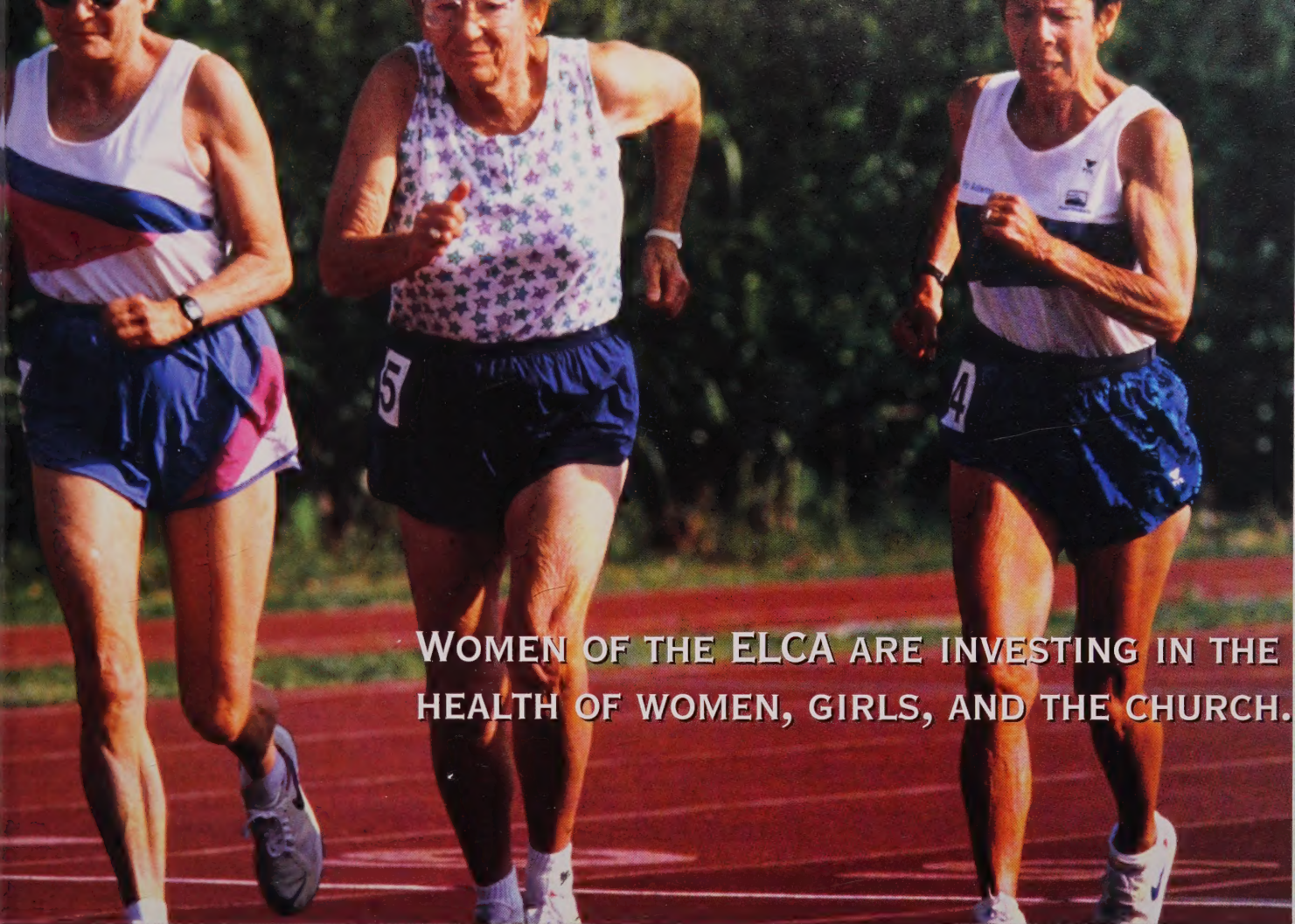
Why such intimacy, God? Why do you choose to be close rather than far? Is your love so durable, so faithful, so persistent? Why do you walk right into our suffering, regardless of its source?

This is the miracle of Christmas. God became flesh and dwells among us. God’s love for us is here and now. Time and space do not stop it. The veil between the human and divine worlds does not stop it. Sin and its consequences do not stop it.

The God who dwells among us calls us in the midst of sin and its consequences to find the way of life, as Jesus did. God calls us to generosity, forgiveness, and hope. God calls us to redeem suffering by learning and healing, by repenting and turning again to the promise of new life in Christ. Come, O come, Emmanuel. God with us. Amen. 🌿

**Catherine Malotky** serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.





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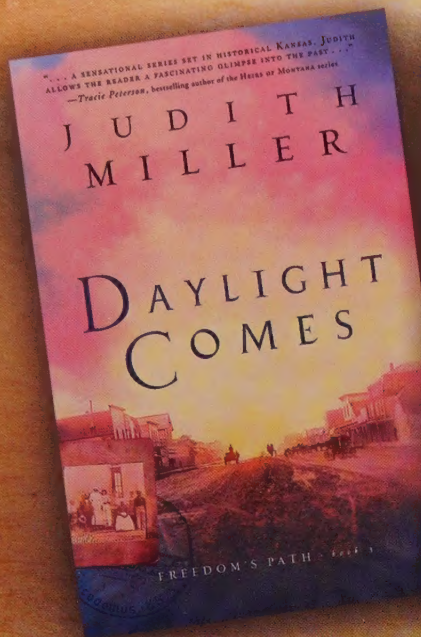
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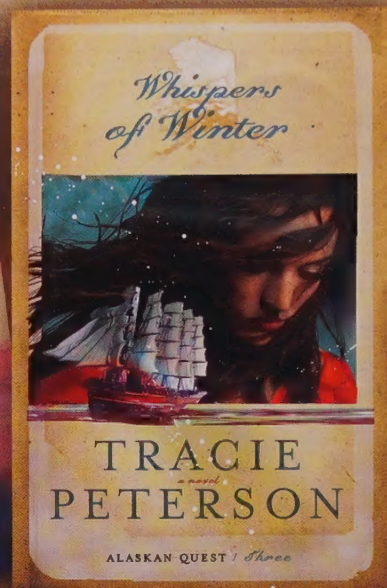
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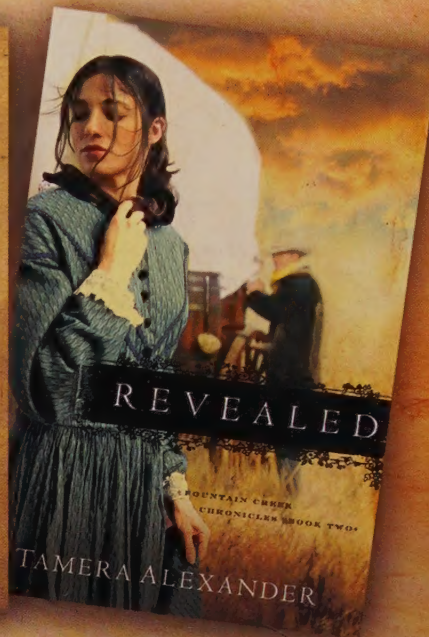
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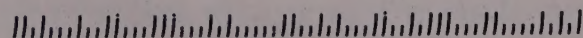
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